

Freedom of the Press

The media environment in Bhutan deteriorated slightly in 2013 due to the government's dominance over the media market, financial difficulties for private media companies, and restrictions on coverage of the election campaign.

The constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, adopted in July 2008, guarantees the right to free speech, opinion, and expression. However, the 1992 National Security Act prohibits criticism of the king, as well as "words either spoken or written that undermine or attempt to undermine the security and sovereignty of Bhutan by creating or attempting to create hatred and disaffection among the people." Defamation can be tried as either a civil or criminal offense. There were no reported legal cases brought against journalists in 2013.

Although the constitution guarantees the right to information, a Right to Information Bill discussed by Parliament during 2012 was shelved and had not been passed by the end of 2013. When the bill was discussed in 2012, government officials justified their delay by cautioning against "acting in haste." Media workers and outside analysts continue to express concern that the government is not committed to passing the legislation.

The Bhutan InfoCom and Media Authority (BICMA), the national regulator, sometimes restricts the publication of or otherwise censors media outlets. In January 2012, the government decided to streamline the licensing process for media outlets by requiring them to pay only one license fee rather than two. However, BICMA stated in January 2013 that it would be unable to honor its previous call for applications to launch private television stations because it was awaiting the passage in Parliament of revisions to a 2006 law that would provide an adequate broadcasting regulatory framework. Of the five applications filed to launch private TV stations, two were shortlisted. In March, the backer of one of the shortlisted candidates, Thimphu TV, filed a lawsuit against BICMA for the delay and eventual denial of his application for a TV license. The individual stated that he suffered financial losses to comply with the state's licensing requirements, which highlights the high financial barriers to enter the television market. The other shortlisted applicant faced similar difficulties.

The Journalists' Association of Bhutan (JAB) was revived in February 2012 after having been dissolved in 2006 due to poor funding and coordination. The JAB's mission is to uphold the interests of journalists across the country and protect free expression in the media. However, the organization is not fully independent in practice, notably because it relies on the government-run Bhutan Media Foundation for the majority of its funding.

There were no reports of threats or intimidation directed at journalists in 2013, but there is a high level of self-censorship. Criticism of the royal family and the Buddhist clergy is not published, and topics that are considered sensitive, such as the expulsion of Nepali-speaking residents in the 1990s, are not covered. The government occasionally restricts certain websites that are deemed offensive to the state or pornographic.

Bhutan successfully held its second-ever national parliamentary elections in 2013, which was particularly noteworthy because the opposition People's Democratic Party won the majority of seats in balloting in which turnout exceeded 60 percent. During the campaign in July, however, the Election Commission

restricted the use of languages other than the country's national language, Dzongkha. This decision curtailed the accessibility of the media for communities who do not understand Dzongkha, such as the Nepali minority in the south and eastern part of the country.

Bhutan has 12 newspapers, 6 radio stations, and 2 television channels, both of which are hosted by Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), the state broadcaster. Bhutan's main print outlet, the state-owned, biweekly *Kuensel*, generally portrays the monarchy in a favorable light, but it has increasingly been addressing societal problems and carrying stories that are critical of the government. Several private newspapers have been launched in recent years, including *Bhutan Times* and *Bhutan Observer* in 2006; *Bhutan Today* in 2008; *Business Bhutan* and *The Journalist* in 2009; *Druk Nyetshul* in 2010; and *Druk Yoedzer* and *Druk Gyelyong Sharshog* in 2011. Bhutan's first broadsheet, *The Bhutanese*, was launched in February 2012 with a stated intent to focus on investigative journalism and provide independent views. The Bhutanese radio market consists of one national public service broadcaster and, due to developments in recent years, five private FM radio stations. In 2013, the state-run television network continued to be the only television broadcaster. Cable television services carry foreign programming, albeit with bans on channels that provide "controversial content"; in addition, high sales taxes and regulatory obstacles render access costs prohibitive for many citizens. Internet penetration stood at 30 percent of the population in 2013.

Almost all media outlets are based in Thimphu, the country's capital. Bhutan's fragile economic climate continues to pose a challenge for private media companies, particularly because such companies tend to be dependent on advertising revenue distributed by state bodies, which accounts for an estimated 80 percent of the market. Recent years have seen staff cuts in many media outlets, with some companies even having to suspend or scale back publication levels for financial reasons. The financial fragility of media companies was underscored in 2012, when the Bhutanese government announced in June that all advertising related to the upcoming 2013 elections would be withdrawn from private media and exclusively published through state-owned media. Some journalists speculated that the new policy was the government's way of retaliating against *The Bhutanese* for articles that alleged abuse of power and corruption by public officials.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Partly Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

59

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

18

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

21

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

20